

THE AUTHORITY OF THE GOSPEL FOR THE MINISTRY OF PAUL¹

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I. Divine Authority and the Christian Faith

1. The importance of authority

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of authority as an issue for Christianity. It is not simply that every other theological question is related to it. Certainly, Christian truth is a unity, with every doctrine intimately connected with every other. The doctrine of authority is, however, unique. Without it no other theological truth has a basis that is at all adequate. Destroy authority and Bible teaching is reduced to interesting religious thought which may or may not have some value today as a stimulating approach to life.

For this reason, the issue of authority has come into focus at every important stage in the history of doctrine. What was the ultimate issue in the church's encounter with Gnosticism? What lay beneath the debate over justification between Catholics and Protestants at the Reformation? What is the issue between conservative Evangelicals and liberals? In each case it is authority.

2. Revelation, interpretation, inspiration and authority

It is important to distinguish between revelation and interpretation. We might be tempted to generalise and to say that in revelation the grammatical subject is God whereas in interpretation it is a human being. God reveals, man or woman interprets.

This is not, however, always true. The revelation itself often includes an element of interpretation. If the revelation comes through an historical event, that event needs to be interpreted before it can be fully revealing, and sometimes God interpreted it directly without human agency.

The Exodus and the cross were historical events, while the redemption of Israel and the atonement through Christ are

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events divinely interpreted. God did not simply tell Moses that the Exodus would happen, but that it would constitute his deliverance of the people from Egyptian bondage. Jesus not only told his disciples he would be crucified, but that he would give his life a ransom for many. His interpretation was, of course, as clearly divine as God's Word to Moses, because he is God manifest in the flesh. In these two cases the revelation consisted of event plus interpretation. Often of course there was human interpretation. When this was given by the Spirit of God through human agency it could become part of the Word of God for the readers of the Bible.

So then interpretation, attributed to the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, is often found within the bosom of revelation. This fact becomes especially important when we consider the way God's revelation of himself unfolded in historical eras. Systematic theology is sometimes in danger of giving the historical factor less than its proper consideration. Biblical theology is an important discipline because it gives due weight to the chronological nature of the historical form in which the revelation was given.

So, in the stage-by-stage unfolding of God's revelation, the inspired human channels of revelation often evaluated and interpreted what was given earlier. The prophets, for instance, often comment on God's disclosure of himself through the great events of Israel's early history, and at a later stage the apostles comment on the Old Testament. These comments are of such importance for the prophetic and apostolic witness respectively that they play a major part in the revelation given through these inspired persons. This revelation came to its climax and its completion in the great event of Jesus Christ. He is the Word of God made flesh. This great historical event, which was really a series of events all associated with one person, also needed and was given inspired interpretation.

But if the historical revelation is complete, interpretation is not. It continues in every generation, for each must have an understanding and application appropriate to its specific situation and needs. There is, however, a major difference between interpretation which is enclosed within the revelatory process and that which is not. It is true that interpretation always requires dependence on the Holy Spirit. But in the case of the biblical writers, there was a special work of the

Spirit, his inspiration, which guarantees the reliability of the interpretation. In this lecture we are interested in interpretation which is part of revelation, in so far as Paul, inspired by the Spirit, comments on earlier stages of revelation. It is of course because God's revelation takes written form in the inspired Scriptures that the Bible possesses authority.

3. Christ and the gospel

The gospel is a message, and that message is an interpretation of the event that is Christ and in particular an understanding of the events of central importance, his death and his resurrection from the dead. How are Christ and the gospel, event and interpretation, connected?

The interpretation was first given in essence by Christ himself. He was the first preacher of the gospel. He is said in the gospels to have preached the gospel, or the gospel of the kingdom, or the kingdom itself, the kingly rule of God. This means that the gospel possesses authority from God, and that this is the authority of the completed revelation. Here the seed planted many centuries earlier has come to full fruition.

4. The authority of the apostles and of the New Testament

What then is the role of the apostles? Christ committed the truth of his gospel to them, and appointed them to proclaim it with authority. After the saving events had themselves taken place, their meaning was expounded with great fullness by the inspired preachers and writers of the New Testament, all of whom were either apostles or so close to them that the gospel, the apostolic doctrine, was normative for them.

It is important to remember that the gospel is essentially truth. Some may suggest that it is 'better felt than told', but, if it is to do its work, it must be proclaimed and expounded in all its saving truth. The apostles not only proclaimed the gospel to the unconverted, but they taught Christians. Although the Acts of the Apostles records the fact of their preaching and also something of its content, there is very little in Acts about the teaching they gave to Christians, although what is given there is valuable. It is in fact in the Gospels and Epistles that we find their teaching given much more fully.

Now it has been recognised that all this material finds integration in one common gospel, expressed in different

ways, but basically the same. This view was put forward in its most influential form by C.H. Dodd in his book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*.² Dodd's view has been challenged,³ but it can be well defended, although it would take us too far from our main purpose to do this now. We will take it for granted in what follows. If Dodd was right, the gospel is the substance not only of the preaching but also of the teaching. If there is a difference, it is the difference of the seed and the plant, of the baby and the adult. The most apt analogy is the relation between the text and expository sermon. The teaching of the New Testament is simply bringing out more fully the meaning and implications of the gospel. It is obviously time we looked more fully at the gospel itself.

II. The Nature and Authority of the Gospel

1. Its substance

A study of the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles and of references to the gospel in the Epistles yields a summary something like the following. God's promises in the Old Testament have now been fulfilled in Jesus the Christ, and especially in his death and resurrection for human salvation. The hearers are called to respond to his good news in repentance and faith, expressed in baptism. In this way God's kingly rule is established among human beings.

The reference to Old Testament fulfilment, although frequent, is not invariable. It is always present in preaching to Jews and also to Gentiles of the synagogue, but in preaching to pagans it is usually replaced by a reference to the God of creation.⁴ B. Gärtner, however, in his study of the Areopagus Address⁵, has shown that even when Paul is addressing a pagan audience his thought is consistently true to the Old Testament background of the gospel despite the fact that he

² C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London, 1936).

³ See e.g. J.D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament. An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London, 1977).

⁴ See Acts 14:15-17, 17:24-31.

⁵ B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, trans. by C.H. King (Lund, 1955).

never quotes it. It was always the background for him, the preacher, even if it was not for them, the hearers.

2. Its status

What is its status? Was it revelation or was it interpretation? Or was it both? It is best to think of it as both. It was *revelation*, because, like the Old Testament, it is called 'the word of God'⁶. This is a revelation term. It is not simply revelation; it is the very summit of revelation.

It is *interpretation* for two reasons: First, it provides a hermeneutic of the Old Testament. The good news was intimately related to the fulfilment of earlier revelation. Contemporary Judaism had not altogether understood the Old Testament; God gave his own hermeneutic of it in the fact of Christ. Secondly, it provided a hermeneutic of that great fact. This hermeneutic embraced selection and significance.

Jesus did many things. In fact, John tells us that if they were all recorded the world itself could not contain the books.⁷ The writers of the four Gospels therefore select materials, as all biographers must. They were, however, no ordinary biographers. They were preaching a message. They therefore place emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus, knowing their significance as the supreme saving acts of God. In so doing they are in tune with the emphasis on these events that we find in the rest of the New Testament. We must not forget that the hermeneutical material is itself part of the revelation and therefore carries divine authority.

3. Its connection with the apostles

The relationship between the gospel and the apostles of Christ is significant and important. Jesus committed his gospel to these men. If he is the substance of its message, these were the people who knew him best of all. They had been close to him, they had seen his acts, and they had heard him teach the people on countless occasions. He had also given special courses of instruction to these men themselves.

It is important to note that this teaching specially directed to them focussed on his coming death and resurrection. The

⁶ E.g. in Acts 4:31; 6:7; 13:46; 1 Cor. 14:36; 1 Thes. 2:13; Heb 13:7; Rev. 1:9.

⁷ John 21:25.

Synoptic writers make this clear to us. They do not give a full account of this teaching, but they do indicate its main themes, and the words they use make it abundantly clear that it was given as a definite course of instruction.⁸ This teaching was given particularly on his last great journey to Jerusalem, the place where these awesome events actually took place.

Most important of all, these men were witnesses of his resurrection. The resurrection is the most important evidence for the truth of the Christian faith and these men had seen the risen Christ. This fact is mentioned over and over again as we listen to the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles.⁹ Also they had been endowed with the Holy Spirit specifically as the Spirit of Truth. It is interesting to note how the prophecies and promises of Jesus about him relate particularly to our Lord's own teaching and also to exposition of the fact of Christ.¹⁰ These found literary form in the New Testament Gospels and Epistles respectively.

4. Its place in the apostolic ministry of Paul

It should be said that we are assuming the Pauline authorship of the thirteen Epistles in the New Testament that claim to be his, and also the authenticity of the Lucan account of his apostolic ministry. What was the essential qualification for apostleship? It must have been at the very least the call of Christ. But were there other qualifications? Acts 1:21 might suggest there were: not only being a witness of his resurrection, but also accompanying with him throughout his earthly ministry. We should however remember that on this occasion they were in fact concerned with filling a gap in a group composed entirely of men who had been with Jesus in that way. We may be wrong, therefore, if we suppose they were stating a qualification of quite invariable application.

Paul was no disciple during the ministry of Jesus, but he did claim to have seen the risen Christ and to have been appointed by him. It is not impossible that others, like Barnabas and James, the Lord's brother, were apostles in the technical sense,¹¹ and also Andronicus and Junias whoever

⁸ *E.g.* Mark 8:31; 9:12-13, 30-2; 10:32-4.

⁹ *E.g.* Acts 2:22-4; 3:32, 33; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39-42.

¹⁰ John 14:26; 15:26, 27; 16:12-15.

¹¹ Note the use of the word 'apostles' in Acts 14:14; 1 Cor. 15:7.

they were.¹² Our present concern, however, is not to vindicate the apostolic claims of Paul; rather, assuming them to be true, it is to enquire what link there is in his writings between apostleship and the gospel, and then to see how his concern for the gospel affected everything he did in the course of his ministry.

In actual fact, our interest is not so much in what authority Paul possessed, but rather what authority the gospel had over him. Now there is no doubt that Paul was enormously preoccupied with the gospel. James Barr has warned us against placing too much emphasis on word-counting in constructing a biblical theology.¹³ Yet without doubt such an exercise has its place, so long as we remember that words are important for the ideas they express, which may also sometimes be expressed in other words. Paul makes considerable use of the terminology of the good news. *Euangelion* ('gospel') occurs sixty times, while it is found only sixteen times in the rest of the New Testament. He is also the major user of *euangelizomai* ('preach the gospel'), with Luke, his companion, coming second. We have also to add to this the many passages where he places emphasis on the death and/or resurrection of Jesus, the central events proclaimed and expounded in the gospel.

5. Tradition and inspiration in the ministry of Paul.

In the Pauline letters we need to reckon with the work both of the second and third persons of the Trinity.

Paul uses the language of tradition,¹⁴ and it is clear that the ultimate source of tradition for him is Jesus.¹⁵ He received the gospel from him.¹⁶ He also quotes Jesus and alludes to his teaching.¹⁷ Even though he was not a disciple of Jesus during his earthly ministry, he stood in the apostolic mainstream as far as the dominical tradition is concerned.

12 Rom. 16:7.

13 J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961).

14 When he writes of teaching being delivered (or passed on) or received, e.g. in 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:1-3; 2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6.

15 Note 1 Cor. 7:10 and 11:23.

16 Gal. 1:1; 1:11-2:10.

17 E.g. Acts 20:25; 1 Tim. 5:18; cf. Luke 10:7.

He says less about the Holy Spirit in relation to his own inspiration. Writing to the Thessalonians, he refers to the Spirit in connection with his preaching of the gospel at Thessalonica, but he has in view the power of his preaching, not its content.¹⁸

1 Corinthians 7 makes an interesting study in the relationship between the tradition which comes from the Son of God and the inspiration that comes from the Holy Spirit. In verses 10, 12 and 25, Paul distinguishes between commands of the Lord and his own judgements. There can be little doubt that the former relate to the teaching of Jesus on the subject of divorce.¹⁹ The latter concern situations for which there was no such guidance given by Jesus himself. In these Paul makes judgements. The decisive word 'judgement' is a better translation of *gnome* here than the weaker and perhaps even tentative English word 'opinion'. After all, Paul wrote both Corinthian Epistles as an apostle of Christ (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1), and he was well aware that his apostleship carried with it authority from the Lord (2 Cor. 10:8-11; 13:10).

What then is the status of these judgements? In 1 Corinthians 7: 25, Paul says, 'Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgement as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.' This trustworthiness was, of course, the product of the work of the Spirit. Paul makes an interesting reference to him at the close of 1 Corinthians 7. Here he says, 'A woman is bound to her husband as long as she lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgement, she is happier if she stays as she is – and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.' There can be little doubt that the closing words of this passage are ironic. The Corinthians were very conscious of the activity of the Holy Spirit in their church life and probably made claims for his activity too easily. Paul's moderate expression therefore may well have been used by him in ironic contrast with their too easily made claims.²⁰

18 1 Thes. 1:5.

19 Compare 1 Cor. 7:10, 11 and Luke 16:18.

20 We might compare Paul with Jeremiah over against the false prophets of his day.

We might compare these words of Paul with what he says in 1 Corinthians 14:37, 38: 'If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.' Although Paul uses two different words for command, *epitage* in chapter 7 and *entole* in chapter 14, they are equivalent in meaning. Both of course imply authority. So Paul recognises the authority of the dominical tradition, and also asserts the authority of his own teaching under the inspiration of the Spirit. In fact, here in 1 Corinthians 14 he seems to be going as far as to indicate that recognition of the authority of his own teaching was a test of what claimed to be prophetic truth.

It looks then as if we need to say that the gospel itself and some basic implications of it (such as some aspects of marriage ethics) belong to the apostolic tradition deriving from Christ himself, but that there was a continuing work of the Spirit in guiding Paul and the other apostles in their application of the gospel to particular situations.

III. The Implications of Gospel Authority for Paul's Ministry

1. Theological implication

Paul was clearly very concerned that the authenticity and purity of the gospel should be maintained. We see this clearly in Galatians 1:6-9, where he includes himself and even angels in a general condemnation if they should pervert the gospel. We see it also in 2 Corinthians 11:4, where he links the gospel with Christ and the Spirit. Just as there can be only one true Christ and one true Spirit, so there can be only one true gospel. Perhaps all three rest on the Old Testament assertion that there is only one God.

Thomas Kuhn has promoted and expounded the concept of the paradigm shift. This is the notion that a new idea, or at least a newly influential idea, comes to have such a controlling effect on the mind of an individual or even of a whole society that the total perspective of the individual or community is altered. Kuhn put forward this concept in the context of a philosophy of science, but it is of course applicable in other

subject areas as well.²¹ No doubt this happened on the Damascus Road. Paul knew now that Jesus, whom he had been persecuting in his followers, was alive and that he was indeed the Christ. The opening of his physical eyes after the temporary blinding on the Damascus Road was undoubtedly a symbol of the inner enlightenment he received then. In Galatians 1:16, he describes it in terms which include an inner as well as an outer light: 'It pleased God to reveal his Son in (*eis*, literally, 'into') me.'

Obviously this great experience would profoundly influence his understanding of the Old Testament. It lost none of its authority for him, but his understanding of it would alter in significant ways as he approached it in the light of the gospel of Christ.²² He came to see the theological implications of the gospel with crystal clarity. We will spell out some of these.

i. God saves people by his grace through Christ and his work alone.

The gospel had so mastered Paul's mind that he was convinced Christ is the only Saviour and that his death and resurrection established the only way of salvation there was, there had ever been or ever would be.

So there could be no compromise with paganism. The pagan could not simply accept Christ by incorporating him into his paganism, so that, for instance, Christ would become one of a number of deities, or even the chief god in a pantheon. As Paul says to the Corinthians, there can be no question of partaking both of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.²³ The promise and demand of the gospel are equally radical. It insists on a faith that embraces the promise in Christ and a repentance that turns away from rebellion against God. This rebellion often shows itself in the worship of other gods and dependence on other saviours, including self-salvation.

21 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edit. (Chicago, 1970).

22 So he was able in the synagogues to argue for the gospel on the basis of a shared outlook on the OT (Acts 17:1-3). For Paul's attitude to the OT, see E.E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1957).

23 1 Cor. 10:14-22.

If the gospel confronts the pagan with its radical promise and demand, it also confronts legalistic Judaism just as radically. The Jew must give up any attempt to save himself. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness. What the law could not do, God did in Christ.²⁴ The Jew needs to see this and bow the knee to Jesus. Moreover, there can be no question of adding anything to the gospel. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Jews expected miraculous signs as evidence of power and the Greeks looked for eloquence as evidence of wisdom, but that Christian preachers brought the simple message of salvation through the cross of Jesus. In that cross and its message however God's power and wisdom were revealed, and yet at the same time hidden, because they were completely contrary to the thinking of the unregenerate world.²⁵

Paul also saw that the Gentile does not need to become a Jew and submit to circumcision. Paul could be quite mild-mannered at times, but he wrote with deep passion to the Galatians. He could see that the Judaizing insistence on circumcision was in fact undermining the gospel. It introduced to the mind of the believer the idea that there were acts necessary to give certainty to his Christian standing. This idea was abhorrent to Paul, gripped as he was by the gospel.

This means, of course, that God's final purpose for Israel could only be fulfilled through the gospel. There can be no doubt from the whole tenor of Romans 9-11 that Paul saw Israel's complete salvation as coming only through Christ and the gospel. He therefore understood the Old Testament promises of a great future for Israel in gospel terms.²⁶

His strong belief in the sovereignty of God and therefore of the certainty of that future salvation for Israel could not in any way qualify his insistence on faith in Christ. He says that if they do not persist in unbelief they will be grafted into the olive tree again and then goes on to affirm that a time would come when 'all Israel will be saved'. Certain it may be, but its

24 Rom. 8:3; 10:4.

25 1 Cor. 1:22-2:16.

26 For the attitude of the NT writers to the Israel prophecies of the OT, see O.T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia, PA, 1945).

practical realization can only be brought about by grace through faith.²⁷

What about saved Israelites of the past? Were they also saved through the gospel? Certainly Paul states in Romans 4 that Abraham was saved by grace through faith and that words of David confirm this as God's way. He has less to say about Christ and his work in relation to the godly men and women of the past. He clearly believed in universal judgement but also in Old Testament salvation and yet he was able to say that God, in his forbearance, had left past sins unpunished²⁸ until the coming of Christ crucified. We can only reconcile these facts if we assume that he believed, as the writer to the Hebrews clearly did,²⁹ that salvation came to people in Old Testament times on the basis of the work of him who was to come.

We can easily understand why he has little to say about this. In his conflict with the Judaizers at Galatia, the issue was not so much whether or not salvation comes through Christ. Rather it was whether it is entirely of grace, so that faith is sufficient to enable us to benefit from that salvation. His main emphasis therefore is on the fact that salvation has always been given on the basis of faith, and not of works of the law.

ii. Christ's resurrection and deity are essential to the gospel.

At Corinth there were apparently people who denied the resurrection of the dead.³⁰ This may have been due to the influence of Greek views on the lower, or even evil, status of the body. Paul saw the seriousness of this denial. He therefore treats it very seriously, although he does not come out with all guns firing as he did when writing to the Galatians. On the face of it, this was a less grave error than that which was influencing the Galatians, for it did not in itself undermine the central facts of the gospel. What Paul realized however is that, when taken to its logical conclusion, it would destroy the gospel.

27 Rom. 11:23-32.

28 Rom. 3:25, 26.

29 Heb. 9:15.

30 1 Cor. 15:12.

Such errors need to be exposed. Logic is a kind of intellectual dynamic that moves the mind. If the logical consequence of a theological position is radical heresy, then the minds of some of those holding it are almost sure to move in that direction eventually. We probably need then to introduce a middle category between central and peripheral truth, perhaps calling it medial. If we think of primary truth as essential to the gospel and peripheral truth as incidental to it, medial truth will consist of doctrines which are not central in themselves but which, when denied, may lead to a denial of central truth. The resurrection of the dead is one of these.

In the Epistle to the Colossians, the issue is the deity of Christ. The nature of the Colossian heresy is still disputed,³¹ but whatever its nature and its antecedents were, it is clear it challenged the value the gospel placed on Christ. In this Epistle, Paul links Christ's person and work closely, indicating, for instance, that he is both the one in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and also that it was through his blood that reconciliation was effected.³²

Clearly then, when Paul says that Christ died for our sins, he had a particular conception of Christ in his mind. It was the Christ who is divine. It was Christ according to his own valuation of himself. As Athanasius, Anselm and Luther all saw so clearly in their differing ways, the deity of Christ is absolutely essential to the efficacy of his atoning work. It is only one who is divine who could deal effectively and decisively with the immense sin problem and bring us into the presence and the righteousness and the family of God.

iii. *The gospel brings illumination to human destiny.*

In it life and immortality have been brought to light.³³ It therefore has profound eschatological implications. The debate at Corinth about the resurrection shows that for some the nature of immortality as resurrection was difficult to grasp. So the gospel really cut across certain cherished philosophical tenets of the Greeks.

³¹ See R.P. Martin, *The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Exeter, 1972), pp. 4-20.

³² Col. 1:19-20.

³³ 2 Tim. 1:9-11.

The gospel also spoke of judgement, as Paul makes clear in Romans 2:16. We may be surprised to find such a close connection between 'good news' and 'judgement', but if the good news of Jesus is God's only way of salvation, there must be judgement for those who reject it.

iv. Christian progress is found exclusively within the parameters of the gospel.

This was evidently another issue within the Colossian church. It could well have become an issue for the Corinthians as well, with their interest in wisdom. Paul declared that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are to be found in Christ and that the Colossian Christians, having received Christ Jesus as Lord, were complete in him. They should therefore now walk in him.³⁴ This means then that there was no second stage of Christian experience which was not in itself a deeper realization of the first. The One who justifies and the One who sanctifies are one and the same Christ. Christianity is not a kind of freemasonry with varying degrees. Christ is all.

Christian teaching then simply exposes for the Christian believer the implications of the gospel. This means that preaching and teaching are intimately related. So Paul says that it is by the gospel Christians are established.³⁵ The same gospel that had saved them would also make them strong. In fact, it seems from 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 that for Paul the gospel was the whole Christian faith. It is the gospel that bears fruit.³⁶

2. Ethical Implications

It is of course a commonplace idea that Christian ethics arise out of Christian theology. This may be seen, for instance, in the Epistle to the Romans. Chapters 12 to 16 are based on chapters 1 to 11, as the pivotal passage in chapter 12:1-2, reveals: 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.' Paul has been expounding God's mercy for eleven chapters. Now they were to respond in consecration to God.

34 Col. 2:1-8.

35 Rom. 16:25.

36 Col. 1:6, 7.

i. *The death and resurrection of Christ are both the cause and pattern of the new life of the believer.*

This links with the theological point made above in connexion with the fact that all true Christian growth is within the parameters of the gospel. This in itself shows the intimate connection for Paul between theology and ethics.

Romans 6 was Rudolf Bultmann's favourite New Testament chapter. He saw very clearly that it indicated the pattern and shape Christian discipleship should take in the world. Bultmann's insight was not, however, based on the gospel of an atoning death and a literal evidential resurrection, for he dismissed both as mythological elements in Paul's presentation.³⁷ We must insist that it is not possible to detach Romans 6 from Romans 1-5 without doing violence to Paul's whole conception of the Christian message. It is because Christ died for us and rose again that any repetition of the pattern in our lives is possible. Apart from his substitutionary atonement there is no way out of the impasse created by sin, either in terms of forgiveness or in terms of a new moral vitality creating and leading to a new lifestyle.

Identification with Christ in his death and resurrection are only possible if these are both real and if they are aspects of one reality. If the death was physical, the resurrection must be physical too. In this great act our sins are purged. It is also true that the death of Jesus was far more than a physical act, for it was the culmination of a life of obedience, in which Jesus had in fact accepted his death as God's will long before it happened.

Martin Heidegger's form of existentialism involved a call for people to move into authentic existence from inauthentic by an acceptance of the principle of death. Bultmann gave this theological form and saw the attitude of Jesus to death as the supreme example of it. So the gospel for him became a call to reproduce this attitude in our lifestyle. It is most important, however, to realise that this is not what Paul calls the gospel. For him, the gospel is fundamentally about what God has done in the substitutionary bearing of our sins by the dying

³⁷ R. Bultmann, writing in H.W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, trans. by R.H. Fuller, vol. 1 (London, 1953), p. 35.

Saviour. This atoning work has great subjective effect, but it is essentially objective, finished, perfect.³⁸

It is only when this is seen that the call to identification with Christ has its proper basis. To say that our subjective identification with him is an implication of the gospel is one thing; to say that it is the gospel is quite another. Identification is with the attitude of Jesus, a willingness to do God's will whatever the cost.³⁹ The spiritual resurrection to newness of life is as much a divine act of vindication as was God's evidential act in the physical resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁰ Because this is our attitude we are then to yield our members to him in newness of life.⁴¹

ii. *Conversion establishes a pattern which should become constant.*

It is most helpful to compare Colossians 3:9, 10 and Ephesians 4:22-4 here. Paul uses much the same terminology in the two passages, but in Colossians he writes of putting off the old man and putting on the new as something that has occurred already, while in Ephesians he is commending it as a constant pattern.

In conversion, in the repentance and faith for which the gospel calls, we put off the old man and put on the new. We are however to do this constantly. In Colossians 2:6, 7, Paul says that as we have received Christ Jesus as Lord, so we are to walk in him. The various moral imperatives in the ethical sections of Ephesians and Colossians are best understood as emerging out of this pattern and pressing home its moral implications. Our manner of life then is to be worthy of the gospel.⁴² In Philippians 1:27, Paul seems to imply that this will reveal itself in the unity of the Philippian Christians and the testimony this will give to the world.

38 E.g. see the way he treats reconciliation as objectively secured prior to its subjective appropriation: Rom. 5:10,11; 2 Cor. 5:18-21.

39 Rom. 6:1-4; cf. Luke 9:22,23.

40 Cf. Rom. 6:11-14 with Acts 13:30, 31; Rom. 4:25.

41 The parallel in Romans 6 between Christ and those who are united to him certainly suggests this.

42 Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10; 1 Thes. 2:12.

iii. *Our new lifestyle is the product of gratitude for the gospel.*

Note the emphasis on gratitude in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Of course, human beings ought to be thankful for the mere fact of life and all the good things a benevolent Creator has given us,⁴³ but when Paul writes of Christian gratitude it is clear he has in view thanksgiving for the gospel. This is plain from an examination of Colossians 1:12. The three references in Colossians 3:15-17 come in the context of Christian worship, which in the Lord's supper was centred in the cross.

In writing to the Corinthians about the collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem, Paul writes of an obedience to the gospel of Christ which shows itself in generosity and which will cause others to give thanks, and closes by saying, 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.'⁴⁴ So here too it is the cross which is the great cause of gratitude for the Christian.

iv. *Failure to live this new lifestyle undermines gospel witness.*

Paul makes it very clear in 1 Timothy 1:3-11 that, although the Christian faith is not legalistic, neither is it antinomian. What the law condemns is also contrary to the gospel. The gospel does not deliver us from moral living but into it. This means that the moral quality of the Christian life should be consistent with the gospel we profess. The way Paul frames his thought at the close of this passage is particularly interesting. Having referred to various sins, he then goes on to write of 'whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me' (vv. 10,11). In this way he demonstrates as clearly as possible that his ethics were based on his doctrine, which in its turn was based on his gospel. Here then he spells out the fundamental nature of the gospel.

v. *The Holy Spirit, who witnesses to Christ in the gospel, is the inner dynamic of this new life in Christ.*

43 Rom. 1:21.

44 2 Cor. 9:12-15.

As we have seen already, Paul writes that he preached the gospel in the power of the Spirit at Thessalonica, so that the word of the gospel and the power of the Spirit were both essential to his gospel ministry. When the Thessalonians welcomed the message, it was 'with the joy given by the Holy Spirit'.⁴⁵

Paul's doctrine of the Holy Spirit is many-sided. Something of this many-sidedness may be glimpsed, for instance, in his Epistle to the Ephesians. Here there is no one passage dealing in any fullness with the Spirit and his work, but there are many allusions, which together build up into an impressive doctrine. In Ephesians 1:13-14, he writes of the preaching of the gospel of salvation and the fact that the believing response of his readers was confirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit as the seal and deposit guaranteeing their inheritance in Christ. Out of this gift comes of course the inner dynamic for the Christian life. This is revealed in a great passage like Romans 8, in his reference to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, 23, and in many other passages.

3. Ecclesiastical implications

i. The churches are built on the gospel.

The Acts of the Apostles gives us many examples of churches established after the preaching of the gospel in a particular area. Those who responded to the preaching were not treated as isolated individuals, but were gathered into churches, for worship, teaching and pastoral care. In Romans 1:1-7, the introduction to the Roman Epistle, Paul writes of the gospel and relates it to his own apostolic ministry, making it abundantly clear that the purpose of the gospel was to call people from all nations and to bring them together in fellowship in Christ.

ii. Differences between believers that do not affect the gospel, or gospel testimony, should not divide them.

In Romans 15:7, the apostle says, 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.' Through the gospel they had been accepted, and so they ought in turn to accept one another. Romans 14 and 15 show us that these believers were differing on the kind of matters that

⁴⁵ 1 Thes. 1:6.

normally made a sharp distinction between Jews in the Diaspora and the gentiles among whom they lived, that is, matters of diet and the observance of special days.

Fellowship between believers in every age and location often expresses itself in sharing in a common meal, not only at the Lord's supper, but in the informal fellowship of the Christian home. The difference of practice between these two groups at Rome must have made such informal fellowship across the Jew/gentile divide very difficult. It is well worth noting, however, that Paul never suggests to these believers that they should simply settle for a division of their church into two. After all, the existence of a number of house churches in Rome would probably have made this an easy solution. Paul however would have regarded it as unacceptable. The gospel accepted by both groups should be much stronger in uniting them than the differences over social practices which were threatening to divide them.

iii. *The work of the church should minister to effective gospel witness.*

The churches established through the gospel ministry of Paul and his friends became in their turn evangelistic centres from which the gospel went out. It seems likely that several of the seven churches for whom the Book of the Revelation was initially written owed their existence to evangelistic work from the church at Ephesus, which was established by Paul. Certainly this would seem to have been true of another in the province of Asia, the church at Colossae.⁴⁶

Similarly, as Paul indicates in 1 Thessalonians 1:7-20, the church at Thessalonica became an evangelistic centre from which the gospel was going out over a wide area, not only in the two Greek provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, but even beyond these. This is remarkable in a church so recently established. Paul's great joy in this reflects his own strong commitment to the spread of the good news of Jesus. In this chapter, he writes of the example he and his companions sought to be, and then goes on to say that the Thessalonians in turn became a model for the other believers in Greece. The NIV's failure to translate *gar* ('for') in verse 8 has had the unfortunate result of obscuring the fact that this model was

⁴⁶ Col. 1:7.

quite specifically related to their zeal for the gospel. Paul is therefore indicating that every church ought to regard the spreading of the gospel as a high priority.

Paul describes his fellowship with the believers at Philippi and Thessalonica as fellowship in the gospel.⁴⁷ This suggests then that to him fellowship was not simply the enjoyment of the company of other Christians, but that it was on-the-job sharing in the task of spreading the good news of Jesus. He also implies that the task of the whole church is to preach the gospel. Ephesians is the epistle of the universal church, and in Ephesians 6:15, using language reminiscent of Isaiah 52:7,⁴⁸ he says that the Christians are to be shod with the shoes of the gospel of peace. So they need to be prepared for gospel witness at all times.

iv. The church's sacraments bear witness to and symbolise the gospel.

This is clear with baptism. In Romans 6, Paul says we are baptised into Christ and specifically into his death and resurrection. This means that the ceremony of Christian initiation bears eloquent testimony to the gospel itself, dramatizing its two central features. In Romans 6, at least, the mode indicated seems to be immersion, and this suggests the totality of the individual's response to Christ in repentance and faith, and so his total identification with him in his death and resurrection.

In I Corinthians 11, the Lord's supper is a remembrance and proclamation of Christ's death until he comes. In its symbolism, the death of Christ becomes the means of nurturing the new life just as baptism had shown it was the source of its initial imparting. In baptism the believer is placed in the sacramental element, while in the Lord's supper the reverse is true. This reminds us of the fact that Paul says not only that believers are in Christ but also that he indwells them.⁴⁹

4. Vocational and personal implications

47 Phil. 1:5; 1 Thes. 3:2.

48 Cf. Rom. 10:15.

49 E.g. in Col. 1:27; 2:10.

It is not easy to separate these, as though Paul had one life as a public and another as a private person, or as if one can divide his Christian service and his Christian life. For him, all life in Christ involved service for him, in fact it was in itself Christian service.

i. *The gospel is all-important.*

It is this which he delivered to the Corinthians as of primary importance.⁵⁰ Moreover, he had a personal sense of compulsion to preach it, as we see in chapter 9, verse 16, of the same Epistle, where he says, 'I am compelled to preach. Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.' In Romans 1, he says he is a debtor, both to the Jew and to the Greek, to proclaim the good news of Jesus to them. The translation of this into practice can be illustrated many times over from the Acts of the Apostles.

ii. *All practical decisions should be in line with the gospel.*

This was Paul's complaint about Peter's actions at Antioch. Although at first having table fellowship with gentile believers, he later withdrew from this. Paul knew that Peter's actions were not in line with the gospel which both of them, and the other apostles, all accepted was a gospel of grace.⁵¹

Paul stated clearly, in 1 Corinthians 9:3, 4, that those who serve the gospel are entitled to receive their living from the gospel. There were, however, times when he would not use this right. What then was the basis of his decision either to take money or to refuse it? It was the effect this would have on the progress of the gospel.

Paul has often been criticised on account of the sharp disagreement he had with Barnabas over John Mark.⁵² We cannot of course be altogether sure of the spirit of the encounter between the two men, but we do know its cause. It was because Mark had failed to complete the first missionary journey. Paul wanted workers whose commitment to the gospel and its spread was strong like his own. So his decision was consistent with his gospel-centred approach. This means

50 1 Cor. 15:3ff.

51 Gal. 2:14ff.

52 Acts 15:36-41.

then that the two clashes we know of with other Christians, those with Peter and with Barnabas, were both related to the gospel.

iii. *The gospel is served by respecting the legitimate scruples of others.*

He would do nothing to hinder the gospel, so, to the Jew he would be as a Jew and to the gentile as a gentile. In 1 Corinthians 9:23, he says, 'I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.'

Timothy's mother was a Jewess, but his father a Greek. Even today, if a man has a Jewish mother, he is regarded by the Jews as one of themselves, no matter who his father is. Paul knew therefore that Timothy's uncircumcised state would be a hindrance to the progress of the gospel among the Jews, and so he circumcised him before he brought him into his itinerant evangelistic team.⁵³

The situation with Titus was different, for he was a full Greek. When some tried to compel him to be circumcised, Paul resisted this. This, as he says, to the Galatians, was 'so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you',⁵⁴ because, of course, there was no need whatever for Greeks and other gentiles to become Jews before they experienced salvation.

These two incidents are particularly interesting because they show that Paul was capable of making apparently opposite decisions when the true basis of the decision in each case was the effect it would have on the progress of the gospel. If he was consistent, then, it was a gospel consistency.

iv. *True apostles should be characterised by a gospel lifestyle, including willingness to suffer.*

In 2 Corinthians, chapters 10 to 13, Paul is seeking to combat the claims of the false apostles at Corinth. All he says is of great interest, but the account of his trials, privations, persecutions and other sufferings given in 11:22-9 is particularly moving. Then, in verse 30, he says, 'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.' Murray Harris, commenting on this section of 2 Corinthians, says, 'For a moment Paul pauses and reflects upon the

53 Acts 16:1-3.

54 Gal. 2:3-5.

paragraph he has just dictated to his stunned amanuensis. Both he and his opponents might boast, but *his* boasting was distinctive, since, paradoxically, he prided himself on evidences of his weakness that became evidence of God's surpassing power in supporting and delivering him (cf. 1:8-10; 3:5; 4:7, 10, 11; 12:5, 9, 10).⁵⁵

One striking feature of these great chapters is the way Paul links his own weakness with that of the crucified Christ, in other words how he links it to the gospel. He says, 'he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.'⁵⁶ here then is a truly gospel-controlled approach to the Christian life and to Christian ministry.

In fact, as Christ's crucifixion in weakness was the cause of the salvation of others, so Paul's gospel service to others was promoted as he shared something of the crucified weakness of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 4:10-12, he says, 'We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.' The same thought emerges in Colossians 1:24, where Paul writes that he fills up in his flesh 'what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.' Here he realised that his identification with the sufferings of Christ was as yet incomplete. These sufferings were 'for you', 'for the sake of his body, which is the church'. Here then is a profound doctrine of Christian service as patterned after Christ's suffering service.

We might note also, in this connection, the parallel between Philippians 2:5-11 and 3:4-11. In the first of these passages Paul outlines the course of Christ's humiliation, his surrender of equality with God and his assumption not only of manhood, but of the deepest shame and suffering as his service to God. He prefaces this profound passage with the words, 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ

55 '2 Corinthians' in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, 1976), on 2 Cor. 11:30, 31.

56 2 Cor. 13:4.

Jesus.’ In chapter 3, he writes of putting aside the things that had induced self-confidence in him. He counted everything but loss, and for what? To gain Christ and his righteousness, and a deep identification with him in his death and resurrection. This then was the lifestyle for which he earnestly longed, a true gospel lifestyle because patterned on the death and resurrection of Christ.

v. Personal frustration is fully acceptable if it serves the interests of the gospel.

This comes out very strongly in Philippians 1. Paul has been put into prison and yet, far from bemoaning this restriction of his freedom, he rejoices in the opportunities this has given him for spreading the gospel throughout the palace guard, who might not otherwise have heard it. More than this, and especially significant, is the fact that, as a result of his imprisonment, many brothers in the Lord have begun to witness more courageously. How striking it is that Paul not only rejoices in this, but does so even when he knows that the motivation of such people is not right!

The gospel is much more important than Paul himself. It matters not a whit whether he is out there preaching it far and wide or whether others are doing it, so long as it is being done. Moreover, even motivation, which he certainly would have regarded as important, was less important than the fact that the gospel was getting a wider hearing.

The gospel, the gospel, the gospel – let Paul perish, so long as the gospel progresses! I find much personal challenge in that.